



RELIGIOUS ACTION CENTER OF REFORM JUDAISM

*The Religious Action Center pursues social justice and religious liberty by mobilizing the
American Jewish community and serving as its advocate in the nation's capital*

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November 14, 2001

Dear Representative:

On behalf of the Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism representing the Reform Jewish Movement, we urge you to oppose H. Con. Res. 239, which would express the sense of Congress that American public schools "should set aside a sufficient period of time to allow children to pray for, or quietly reflect on behalf of, the Nation during this time of struggle against the forces of international terrorism." The devastating events of September 11 have not changed the fact that government promotion of prayer in public schools is a direct violation of the First Amendment.

Because children in public schools are a captive audience, making prayer an official part of the school day is both coercive and invasive. Organized school prayer constitutes an unmistakable government endorsement of religion. Furthermore, our public schools are for *all* children, whether Catholic, Baptist, Quaker, atheist, Buddhist, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Protestant or agnostic. Public schools are supported by *all* taxpayers, and therefore must be free of any official religious observance.

By all means, let our children "pray for, or quietly reflect on behalf of, the Nation during this time of struggle." But let those prayers be led by their houses of worship, their families or by their conscience, wherever they may be. For even in public school students do have the freedom and opportunity to worship. Under current law students can pray and read the Bible privately, say grace at lunch, distribute religious materials to their friends and join voluntary religious clubs. The courts have declared only government-fostered prayers unconstitutional, that is, those led, required, sanctioned, scheduled or suggested by officials. It is dishonest to call any prayer "voluntary" that is encouraged or required by a public official or legislature. By definition, if the government suggests that students pray, whether by scripting the prayer, asking them to vote whether to pray, or setting aside time to pray, it is endorsing and promoting that prayer.

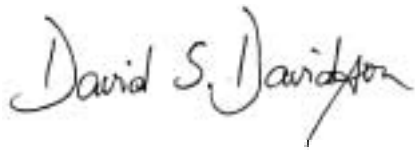
The Jewish community has a deep stake in the preservation of the separation of church and state. As members of a religious minority whose history is so dominated by oppression, we are especially sensitive to any effort to weaken the safeguards of pluralism and minority expression.

If our nation is to fight the forces of international terrorism, we must strive to uphold the invaluable tenets of our democracy that we hold so dear. We cannot allow this tragedy to become a vehicle for anyone's political agenda, and this harmful, divisive resolution is nothing more than an attempt to use the September 11 attacks to promote unconstitutional school prayer and weaken the separation between church and state. We urge you to reject this resolution, to stand in defense of religious liberty and the ideals of American Democracy.

Sincerely,

Rabbi David Saperstein

Director, Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David S. Davidson". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized "D" and a long, sweeping underline.

Judge David S. Davidson
Chairman, Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism